ON THE EDGE OF BLASPHEMY

August 28, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Mark 8:27-33

"And he asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"
-Mark 8-29 (RSV)

My texts this morning are three. And I would like very much if you could hold them in your minds - beside one another... The first is the Gospel lesson, Mark 8:27-33. The second consists of a few lines from a short play by Ernest Hemingway, "Today is Friday." The third is the cover of Time Magazine, August 15, 1988.

First, Mark 8:27-33:

"And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that I am?' And they told him, 'John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets.' And he asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Christ.' And he charged them to tell no one about him.

"And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.'"

The Hemingway play takes place in a wine cellar at 11:00 o'clock at night. Three Roman soldiers have been drinking all evening. Hemingway doesn't say where they are. He doesn't have to. The bartender has mixed a special drink for one of the soldiers who is not feeling well. The soldier drinks it, - wipes his mouth, and exclaims profanely, - "Jesus Christ."

With equal distain another says, "That false alarm!"

But a third soldier responds: "Oh, I don't know. He was pretty good in there today."

The dialogue continues.

Second soldier: Why didn't he come down off the cross?"

First soldier: "He didn't want to come down off the cross. That's not his play."

Second soldier: "Show me a guy that doesn't want to come down off the cross."

First soldier: "Aw hell. You don't know anything about it. Ask George there. Did he want to come down off the cross, George?"

The bartender responds: "I'll tell you gentlemen, I wasn't out there. It's a thing I haven't taken any interest in."

Second soldier: "Listen, I seen a lot of them - here and plenty of other places. Anytime you show me one that doesn't want to get down off the cross when the time comes - when the time comes, I mean - I'll climb right up with him."

First soldier: "I thought he was pretty good in there today."

The cover of Time Magazine, August 15, 1988, a composite picture of Jesus, actually made up of thirty small squares, taken from different portrayals. In one of the blocks, bold lettering, "Who was Jesus?"

It is the issue in all three texts, presented with simplicity and power and urgency in the Gospel lesson from Mark...

"Who are men saying that I am?
Who do you say that I am?"

It is the issue with which Hemingway struggled in his own way, using his favorite literary setting of men drinking and talking in a bar until closing time, about how to live and die with integrity.

It is the issue that has haunted men and women for two thousand years. Who was this man? It has compelled the imagination of artists, poets, novelists and movie makers and composers, from Johann Sebastian Bach to Andrew Lloyd Webber, El Greco to "Godspell," and it has called out of ordinary people a relentless curiosity... "Who was this man?" - and a relentless sense that the answer to that question has something to do with the answers to the questions, "Who am I? What am I about? What is the meaning of my life?"

The question has never been far from the surface of our culture. And now it has burst through the surface dramatically with the release of Martin Scorsese's movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ," on August 12.

The Time cover article was about the movie and the strong public reaction to it. But in addition, Time presented a major article on the identity of Jesus. It is a great article, a fine review of both the historical and modern schools of thought on the issue. We ought to be ecstatic about out that. We ought to be grateful to Martin Scorsese for inspiring open public discussion of our fundamental claim... No preacher

in this era has accomplished that. No one I know of has so stimulated open, intelligent and vigorous debate of the Christian Gospel. Even in the midst of the televangelists' debacle no one thought to put Jesus on the cover of Time. My only regret and frustration was that it all happened while I was away. I comforted myself with the reality that probably 80% of the country's preachers were on vacation in August when the issue surfaced... at least mainline preachers. The fundamentalists all seemed to be home. Maybe they don't take vacations. Or maybe picketing movie theaters is what they do on vacation.

The motion picture - "The Last Temptation of Christ" - is not a cinema portrayal of the Gospel. It is in no way a New Testament docu-drama. It is an adaptation of a work of fiction, a novel written by Nikos Katzantzakis in 1955. The author uses the story of Jesus as a framework to work out his literary theme. He, therefore, does not simply tell the story over again. The premise of the novel is that the man Jesus struggled with his identity and the fundamental temptation Jesus had to face was the appeal of happiness, comfort, security and the enjoyment of God's gift of life. Apparently that represents the author's spiritual struggle as well and, I would submit, it is a very relevant topic in an age that has strongly defined the purpose of human life precisely in terms of accruing enjoyment.

In the movie, Jesus is tempted, most of all, to marry, enjoy life, settle down, have children. His temptations, that is to say, are pretty average, pretty normal stuff... In the introduction to the book, Mr. Kazantzakis wrote: "That part of Christ's nature that was profoundly human helps us to understand him and to pursue His passion as if it were our own."

And so, Jesus struggles in the book and the movie; struggles with the purpose of his life, struggles with his fears and hopes and the compromises life has forced on him - making crosses for the Romans in his carpenter shop, for instance. He struggles with God and with his deepening sense of God's call. And he struggles to the end with this major issue of what it means, what it demands, to be God's man -utterly, withholding nothing, which for Kazantzakis means a free man - fully a man. The images used to convey these struggles are fanciful, fictional, dramatic: they are not always Biblical. They are, occasionally, vividly human and sometimes openly sexual.

The reaction to the movie was very strong. It started before the movie was released. People who had not seen the movie nor read the book became enraged. Pickets showed up at theaters across the nation and at the home of corporate executives: religious leaders ranted and raved. Mr. Falwell declared war and Mr. Bright of the Campus Crusade for Christ volunteered to be the censor for all of us by buying up and destroying all the copies of the movie.

Responsible and thoughtful movie critics were largely favorable in their reviews.

Some said that the novel and book "do not undermine Christianity but rather makes Jesus' ministry more meaningful to modern men." [New York Times, 8/11/88]

Janet Maslin of the New York Times called Mr. Scorsese "the most innately religious of major American film makers, certainly one of the best."

Lloyd Sachs, Chicago Sun Times, said the movie "stirs the soul and shakes the intellect" and that "many people will leave the theater in greater touch with their religion than when they arrived." [Chicago Sun Times, 8/12/88]

(I can testify to the truth of that. We celebrated our return to the city by going to Wrigley Field Monday night and the Biograph Tuesday night and for the rest of the week, around our house, Jesus, Judas Iscariot and Mary Magdalene - edged out Goose Gossage, Don Zimmer and Andre Dawson - as topics of discussion and that's a bit of a miracle! I probably shouldn't say it, but I can't resist. The game went into extra innings. So did the movie! It is very long.)

One of the best pieces I read was by Roger Ebert who took on both the opponents and the theological issues. "Why is it that censors always seem to attack serious works of art and ignore the trivial ones?" he asked. I wonder about that too, Mr. Ebert. Where are the pickets when "Friday the 13th" and "Chain Saw Massacre" are celebrating blood, cruelty, death, bizarre ritual and nihilism? "If I were a theologian, I might be tempted myself," Ebert wrote - "tempted to suggest that these censors themselves are committing heresy by attempting to fashion an image of Christ that denies his manhood." [Chicago Sun Times]

And Andrew Greeley took a similar position: "Martin Scorsese is more faithful to Christian tradition than are those who are criticizing this movie." [New York Times]

On the other side, critical of the movie - were the American Family Association which urged a letter campaign and boycott, Jerry Falwell who declared war on the movie industry, Bill Bright who wants to censor, a reactionary group called the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property with enough money to take out a full page ad in the Times to announce among other things that celibacy is "intrinsically superior to marriage" - which is certainly news.

James Wall at the Christian Century didn't think much of the movie as art. Wall says the film is "utterly lacking in serious theological vision."

The last thing you need is one more set of opinions - but I went to the trouble of collecting all this material and seeing the movie -- and I have a few I want to express.

The first is that Christians ought to know better than to propose censorship of any kind. The Greek Orthodox Church tried to suppress the novel and prosecute Kazantzakis. The movie was on the old Vatican Index of

Forbidden Books. As a Presbyterian Christian, one of my deepest commitments is to freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of religion. I conclude that when anybody, including Christians, start to assume that some of us have the right to decide what the rest of us can read, see, say or think, freedom is the casualty, humanity is demeaned, God is insulted and totalitarianism is not far way. Hitler and Stalin told the artists what to paint, the musicians what to play. You can't see what the government doesn't want you to see in Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Chile, South Africa, Guatemala, Russia, North Korea or East Germany.

I believe God created us to be free... and I think that means the risk that freedom will not always be used responsibly. Art will not always be edifying or good or beautiful. Art, free to be art, will not always please me... but I don't want the city council to decide what art can be displayed - I don't want anyone deciding for me or you - what we can read, see or say.

The second observation is whimsical. It is that the major result of all of this public furor is that a lot of people will see the movie who otherwise would not have been aware of it. It used to be an open secret that the way to make a pile of money in the entertainment business was to get your movie banned in Boston... or your play on the "Index." In addition, Jim Wall pointed out, every televangelist has used this occasion to appeal for yet more money. There is more than a little irony here.

The third observation I have is that the whole affair underscores the fundamental mystery of our faith, the compelling, perplexing, inspiring, irritating conviction that in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, God lived among us.

The existence of God is not the issue and never has been. The existence of a creator - a moral law - a divine will - important issues, but no one much gets upset about them. Something like 95% of the American people believe in them. The atheists are the weakest and most over-rated minority in our midst. Things heat up, however, when someone suggests that the Creator God, the moral law, the divine intent for the world may be seen - encountered - experienced in the life of a first century Jewish carpenter - become itinerant preacher and public rabble rouser.

There is a wonderful scene in the movie. Jesus and his rag tag followers have come to the Jerusalem Temple, and there he has kicked over the tables of the money changers and merchants, people are yelling and screaming, animals are loose, it is utterly chaotic, the very epitome of the orderly, established religion. The High Priest appears with an associate. "What is going on?" they ask. Jesus tells them he is the Messiah and one says, "That kind of talk will get you killed." The other says, "Blasphemy."

The claim that Jesus is Lord has always seemed blasphemous. Men and women have always wanted their savior to be above the ordinariness of life. They have always found the most unbelievable proposition to be that God somehow so loves this world and human life that God became one of us, lived like us, died like us.

Jesus' contemporaries were scandalized, not by his reinterpretation of the Mosaic Law; not by his announcement of the Kingdom of God, but by the claim that Jahweh, God of Israel, the holy creator of the universe, lived in this man.

And so the oldest and most enduring Christian heresy is that Jesus was not fully human; that in order to contain the life of God in his life, Jesus had to be less than - or more than - fully human. The great theological disputes of the church in the past, and the great creeds hold tighty to Jesus' humanness. For his humanness is what is always at risk... Every Sunday we say in the Creed that he was "conceived... born... suffered... crucified... died" and the intent of that series of verbs is - an affirmation of his humanness.

What is it about us that makes us blanch at it - wince at the idea that he was like us? What is it about us that has such a very difficult time imagining that Jesus was as fully human as we are? Are we afraid that if he was like us we could become more like him?

The New Testament goes to great lengths to prevent our forgetting it. "We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are... " the Bible says. [Hebrews 4:15] Christian doctrine maintains that Jesus did not sin, but it has never, never suggested that he was less than human, that when Jesus the man looked at Mary he saw anything other than a woman. Those closest to Jesus had trouble with it too. When he pressed them on the issue, Peter spoke for the group. "You are the Christ, son of the living God." Peter was right on the mark doctrinally. But then - and we miss this important sequence - as soon as the words are out of his mouth, Peter shows that he hasn't the foggiest idea of what they mean. Peter could not, apparently, keep the tension in his own mind between the Messiah and his friend Jesus. The Messiah - could not suffer and die! Scorsese's disciples, by the way, are wonderful. They sit around the fire griping and arguing, not really sure what to make of him. They think they see in him an alternative to the life they are living, an alternative way of thinking and relating. So they follow. Even though they do not understand who he is or where he is going, they follow.

And there it is. Christianity is not a matter of believing certain ideas about Jesus to be true or keeping the faith as a specific set of orthodox theological concepts. It is a matter of following him, trusting him, accepting him as the Lord of your life. He did not administer a theological entrance exam to prospective disciples. What make a disciple is the willingness to follow - the giving him our lives - the living in his love.

Of course there are uncertainties. Of course there are doubts. Anyone who claims to understand the doctrine of the incarnation has altogether missed the central mystery of our faith. What God wants of us is not comprehension, orthodoxy, but faithfulness.

They learned who he was by following him. After his death, when they should have been absolutely defeated, when they really should have been packing it in and returning to their homes, older and wiser, they

became convinced, one by one, absolutely convinced that he was not dead. Jesus Christ came to those who had been following him and gently, but surely confirmed their faith and they knew, finally, who he was.

From his prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "What is bothering me incessantly is the question... who Christ really is, for us today." [Letters and Papers from Prison]

Do you remember your first image of Jesus? My first image of him was the large stained glass window in the sanctuary of the Presbyterian Church of my childhood. It is engrained in my memory from many hours spent looking at it while sermons and prayers droned on and on. It is a familiar picture of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane. The colors are soft, the sky is blue and purple and pink, his robe is spotless, his hands and feet are clean and well manicured. It is lovely and comfortable and safe. The man in that picture became my Lord when I was mature enough to understand something of the human agony of that moment, as he was praying to God to let him live.

Jesus becomes Lord to me as I know that he struggled - that he wondered about the meaning of his life, as I have, wrestled with options, made hard and painful decisions. This man in the stained glass window became someone I wanted to follow when I knew about his humanity. He is my Lord precisely because he was human. He is my Lord precisely because I know how deeply he loved his life - and therefore how precious - how incredibly gracious it was when he give it up.

The stained glass Jesus became Lord when I could see that he loved that wedding at Cana, and loved his friends, Peter and John, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, that he laughed and wept and got angry and tired and depressed and joyful and that he was full of love for the world and the goodness of his life.

He became Lord when I saw fully that nothing about me is strange - or unacceptable to him: that my own humanity and yours, with everything that includes, its passion and its silliness, its physical appetites and its spiritual potential - all of it - this human being - is honored by his having shared it.

The central mystery of Christian faith is that the Lord Jesus Christ was human...

"He was no ascetic" says Hans Kung - "Sour-faced piety he found repulsive... He shared in ordinary life, ate, drank and accepted invitations to banquets." [On Being a Christian, p. 198]

And Karl Barth, "He is the same as us... if there is genuine humanity, here it is." [Dogmatics in Outline, p. 97]

After thirty years or so of working at it, I have read the theologians and the novelists and playwrites on the issue. I know the answer to the first question he asked... "Who do men say that I am?" The answer to the second question, "Who do you say that I am?" came slowly - as the stained glass Jesus became a man, my friend, and brother and Lord.

To be a Christian is to follow him.

It is a matter of coming to terms with the fact that you are loved by him, unconditionally and eternally.

It is a matter of living in that love - in the sweet freedom with which his love blesses us - and it means living with the arduous responsibility of loving, accepting, forgiving others; wives, husbands, friends, colleagues, children, parents.

It is a matter of living with a strong sense of his justice and compassion for all God's children.

It is a matter of living out his clearest mandate about finding your life by losing it.

It is a matter of passion and love and laughter and undying hope. It is more like falling in love than taking an exam. It is more like walking into sweet freedom than carrying a burden.

I invite you, in the quiet of this hour, in the privacy of your soul, to decide - for the first time perhaps - or to reaffirm a decision you made long ago - to be his woman - his man - to follow.

I invite you to be a disciple, and to live on this arduous, magnificent, exhilarating edge of blasphemy. Amen.